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Mark R. Dodd

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Recommended Citation
Mark R. Dodd (2019) "The Idaho Shakespeare Festival’s Macbeth," Early Modern Culture: Vol. 14 , Article 33. Available at: https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/emc/vol14/iss1/33
The Idaho Shakespeare Festival’s *Macbeth*

Directed by Charles Fee  
Festival Amphitheater & Reserve, Boise, Idaho  
Performance date: June 14, 2018

Reviewed by MARK R. DODD

The Idaho Shakespeare Festival (ISF) outdoor amphitheater consists of little more than a small thrust stage flanked by walls (creating wings), and fully visible lighting scaffolding. One can often see through and beyond the stage to the rolling hills of Boise. The seating at ISF carries this further, with the first seven rows of “seats” just deep steps with grass where people sit on low chairs or blankets. Food and drink are consumed regularly in the audience just like in Shakespeare’s day. And though seated, these literal “groundlings” are up close to the actors like the standing groundlings at Shakespeare’s Globe Theater.

Even night shows begin in the daylight and as with the Globe are initially lit by natural light, so the audience not only sees the actors without lights but also the actors fully see an audience not hidden by the darkness of the theater. The actors thus frequently play off of the audience, entering through and even sometimes performing in the audience. This design and use of both performance and seating space fosters an intimacy between audience and players and a sense of immediacy that helps bridge the gap between a modern audience and that of Shakespeare’s time. For the 2018 production of *Macbeth*, directed by Charles Fee,
ISF carried this a step further by adding two small boxes for audience members at the rear of the acting space.

![Figure 2: Picture of Stage with Stage Seating for a production of Hamlet. DKM Photography, 2017](image)

Though Fee’s *Macbeth* was a quite traditional production both in costume and content, throughout the performance I found myself wondering how you tell a 400-year-old story to a contemporary audience. I sat on stage, so I saw the play from behind the actors; but more importantly part of my theatrical experiencing was observing the audience as they watched the play. I could see their faces. I could see them staring or munching away at the food they had brought. One of the difficulties for a modern audience seeing *Macbeth* is lack of awareness about the events which shaped the play in its original 1606 performances, such as the Gunpowder Plot, the presence of a Scottish king on the English throne, and James’s own fascination with witches, as evidenced in his *Demonologie*. These contexts have all been wonderfully illuminated by Alvin Kernan.¹ All of these issues added a level of immediacy to the original production and would have had effects for some time. A play about the murder of a King by a traitor and the eventual overthrowing of the murderer who took over the kingdom would have had an immediacy that modern American audiences do not feel. Presumably a far greater number of original audience members would have “believed” in witches and their threats than is likely in modern audiences. How do you get a modern audience to “see” this play without these contexts? Do modern audiences know that the significance of Banquo’s son not being killed is because King James of England traced his ancestry through Banquo’s son? That England’s ruler was derived from the plot of the play? Would this lack of knowing not create a lack of
emotional response in an audience seeing the play? Do modern audiences believe in witches or do they just see the witches as a psychological issue in Macbeth’s mind? To my mind, these questions must be answered and alternatives provided by a production of *Macbeth* to make the play come alive as it did in Shakespeare’s day.

Perhaps the most difficult aspect of Macbeth for a modern audience is reactions to the witches. Audience members I interviewed acknowledged that the term “witch” has both a historical and contemporary negative connotation, but also confessed that they associate them with fairy tales, previous society’s endeavors to explain phenomena they didn’t understand, rather than evil, or considered them expressions of Macbeth’s own growing madness. In this production, the witches appeared on stage in far more scenes than in Shakespeare’s text. In the Folio text, the witches enter in four scenes (1.1, 1.3, 3.5 & 4.1). However, in the ISF production the witches appear in at least eight scenes. (In this production the role of Hecate was cut, and so 3.5 was completely cut.) The ISF witches are costumed as if they are bats. They are in black with wings and they use crutches for the front legs of a bat. They appeared on stage in many scenes although they had no lines, and there was no sense that any of the characters in the play were aware of the witches’ presence in these additional scenes.

*Figure 3: The three witches up stage center. Banquo is behind their wings. DKM Photography, 2018.*
Nevertheless, their presence affected my feelings about the meaning of the play. Three scenes were particularly affecting. In scene 3.4 Banquo’s ghost enters a banquet being given by Macbeth and Lady Macbeth after their coronation. In the Folio text only Macbeth sees the ghost, originally appearing in the chair that Macbeth was supposed to sit in. Macbeth’s reaction to the ghost usually raises question about his mental stability. In the ISF production Banquo enters the scene with the witches, who seemed to “escort” him on. I was very puzzled by this: How are evil witches able to bring on the ghost of the “good” Banquo? Or is the “ghost of Banquo” not really Banquo’s ghost but a trick the witches are playing on Macbeth to further corrupt him? In earlier scenes they largely act as purveyors of Macbeth’s fate, but here they directly intervene in his life. They are not just figures of fate.

Figure 4: Banquo behind witches. DKM Photography, 2018.
The ISF witches also appear in 5.4, the scene near Dunsinane in which the forces opposing Macbeth are approaching his castle. The witches posed with their crutches raised straight above them and thus their wings also were above them. They looked similar to outdoor table umbrellas, which to me made them look like the trees of Dunsinane. They became witnesses to the very action that was a prerequisite for the fall of Macbeth. Again I could only ask: What was the purpose of their being in this scene? Only characters opposed to Macbeth are in this scene. Does it suggest that the witches have a larger purpose? A larger meaning other than with Macbeth?

The third scene that affected my feelings about the play was when the witches appear in the final scene. Macbeth has been beheaded; he is dead. This scene has Malcolm, soon to be the next king; Macduff, who brings on the cut off head of Macbeth; and other supporters of Malcolm. Why are the witches in this scene? it certainly seems to suggest at the least that they are celebrating Macbeth’s end. But it also could suggest that the witches have further actions against the winners as well. One could only imagine that King James would have thought very negatively at the least about witches surrounding the king whom he claimed descent from in Scotland.

I will admit that all these scenes have left me without a clear thesis as to what their effects are on the meaning of the play. I expect different audience members would come up with different interpretations. I do not know what the intent of the director was in adding these scenes. Do the presences of the witches suggest a commentary on the fate of human activity no matter who is in control? Are we always threatened by the forces of evil around us? Does the presence of the witches suggest a commentary on the nature of human fate? Are we forever fated to act in evil ways no matter who is King?

But perhaps the real issue is that in a play where almost all the original or historical issues are ones for which the audience cares little, it doesn’t matter who
becomes king. It’s doubtful that many in the audience even care if Malcolm becomes king. It’s also doubtful that many particularly like him. The witches are the figures that draw attention—even in an age that doesn’t believe in such things. They draw attention on the stage.

*Figure 6: Witch [Laura Welsh Berg*] and Malcom [Jeffrey C. Hawkins*]. Macbeth, final scene. DKM Photography, 2018.*
It was seeing this last photo, after I had seen the play, that led me to my final interpretation. Sitting where I was, behind the actors, did not allow me to appreciate the effect this moment gave to the main audience. I was not able to see the brightly lit redness of the witches’ hair. I did not see effectively the almost transfixed look upon Malcolm’s face as he stares at the crown. He has a look of self-absorption: I am King. Only me. He has achieved his goal. But it is the Witch’s hair lit in red that dominates the scene. It is her straight ahead look at the audience with a marked indifference while Malcolm stares at the crown with complete self-absorption. His goal has ended and he has all that he has wanted. She is indifferent. She seems far more prepared for what is to come. She has the final victory. The witches have won and will continue to win over such humans.

Notes


Mark Dodd is an adjunct at Eastern Connecticut State University, following fifteen years full-time at Idaho State University, teaching Literature, Composition, and Linguistics. Mark also has an extensive background in amateur theater and opera, as an actor, director, and on occasions a writer. His previous publications explored issues in productions of works of Shakespeare and George Bernard Shaw.